

**can't keep holding
my breath**

cathect

can't keep holding my breath by cathect

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Summary:

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“I f-figured you wouldn’t want to be alone.” Bill’s voice is quiet, nervous, and Richie feels a little bad for the way he answered. “And you did the s-same for me, so.”

Richie doesn’t respond, and they sit in silence, the only sound coming from the rain beating against their respective windows. It’s eerily similar to the night of Bill’s birthday, including the way those four and a half minutes seem to take three hours to drag by.

Richie’s eyes stay trained on the digital clock on his nightstand, watching 11:58 turn into 11:59. He actually considers praying for a moment.

12:00. Silence. And then—

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or the one where you hear your soulmate's thoughts in your head
once you both turn eighteen and richie's really hoping the universe is
on his side just this once.

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Author's Note:

a few notes about this fic:

- this is, yet again, a modern high-school age au set at the end of the losers' senior year.
- the events of "it" have not taken place in this au.
- i do not condone the illegal use of drugs.
- this is a soulmate au where you hear your soulmate's thoughts in your head once you both turn eighteen, and it was inspired by erin's jughead/veronica soulmate au (and also her red string of fate au).

thank you to erin, as always, for editing. and thank you to han for catching that one typo and my "oh my god they were roommates" reference. i love you both!

Beverly's the first to turn eighteen.

She invites all the Losers to the quarry to countdown to midnight together. They build a bonfire and huddle around it, passing Richie's pipe around. Even Eddie takes a couple of hits after some prompting from the Trashmouth himself— *it's a party, Eds, come on.*

As they start to count backwards from ten, Richie grips onto Beverly's hand, screaming the numbers right into his best friend's face. They're all a little fucked up, so they each arrive at zero at different times, but they all manage to beat the clock.

When the display on Bev's phone finally does change to midnight, everyone turns to look at her. She's got her eyes screwed tight, and her hold on Richie's hand is even tighter.

A full minute of silence passes before she opens her eyes again, and the Losers collectively hold their breath.

“Nothing.” She doesn’t sound particularly upset about it, though. “At least, not yet. But considering it’s probably one of you, I’m not too concerned.”

The boys laugh in response, the pipe gets passed from Mike to Beverly, and the night goes on.

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Bill is sick on his birthday. Like, *Mrs. Denbrough actually calls and warns the other parents against letting the Losers come anywhere near the house* sick. Richie wants to try anyway, and even comes up with a whole plan to jump the fence and sneak in through Bill’s window, but Stan talks him out of it. So, instead, he calls Bill that night, and stays on the phone with him until midnight.

“You scared, Big Bill?” Richie asks, spinning slightly in his desk chair. He’s got the phone pressed to his ear and his other hand is absentmindedly tapping a rhythm into his leg. Bill groans on the other end and makes a small gagging noise. Richie instantly sits up straighter. “Bill? You okay?”

“*I’m f-fine.*” Bill responds, the end of his sentence spilling into a cough. “*And, no, I’m not scared.*” Richie waits, listening close for any other sign that Bill is in pain. When he’s satisfied, he lets the easy grin spread across his face again even though Bill can’t see him.

“You probably should be,” he says, kicking his feet up onto his desk. “What if you get someone like Bowers? Or, god forbid, *Eddie.*” It’s something of a running joke between the Losers: Eddie is their friend, and they love him dearly, but he’s got a desperate need for control. Richie knows *he* wouldn’t be able to handle it, and wonders often how someone else will. Bill’s voice pulls him back to the conversation.

“*Sh-shut up.*” Bill says but he’s giggling as he does. “*Getting one of the other Losers would be lucky.*” Richie plays with the hem of his shirt, pretending not to notice the catch in Bill’s throat.

“Yeah.” He responds. Pulling his phone away from his ear for a moment, he checks the time. Two minutes to midnight. “Almost

time.” Bill hums in response.

They spend those two minutes in silence, and Richie gets swept up in his own thoughts. The next thing he hears is Bill whispering “it’s midnight,” into the phone.

“Anything?” Richie asks, stomach in knots. Bill goes quiet again for a few moments, then sighs.

“I got nothing.” He responds. Richie reigns in his own sigh of relief that it wasn’t Beverly. *“But Bev is right, you guys are all still seventeen, so we just have to wait, right?”*

“Right.”

Richie falls asleep that night to the soft sound of Bill snoring on the other end.

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Stan is the next to come of age.

He’s never really been one for parties, so the Losers just sort of show up and hang out in his living room. They eat pizza and watch some dumb movie and, when the old grandfather clock in the back room strikes twelve, they fall silent and wait.

“Nothing.”

There’s a collective groan this time. They’re 0 for 3 so far, and everyone’s got a burning curiosity of what it’s like to find them—your *soulmate*. To have someone else’s thoughts along with your own.

“Maybe we’re all just going to end up alone.” Richie says with a shrug. Bill elbows him in the ribs at the falling expression on Stan’s face.

“Not a comforting thought, Trashmouth.” Beverly says, throwing a handful of popcorn at him. He winces as one manages to work its way behind his glasses and into his eye, but her actions break the tension in the room and a few minutes later finds Richie declaring a food fight.

Later on in the night, when all the other Losers are passed out in various parts of the house, Richie untangles himself from Bev and goes on a hunt for water. He's been to Stan's place a thousand times, but his parents are always changing the arrangement of things, so it takes him a full five minutes just to find a glass.

He's on his way back to bed when he sees the porch lights on outside.

Pushing his glasses up his nose, he peers through one of the windows to see if anyone is out there and sees Bill sitting on the steps, lighting a cigarette. It's almost three in the morning, and there's a tug at Richie's heart when he imagines Bill being alone out there for long.

"Bill?" Richie pulls open the door, wrapping his arms around himself once he's outside. "It's fucking freezing out here, man, what are you doing?" Bill turns around, exhaling and then waving the smoke away so he can see Richie clearly.

"Couldn't s-sleep." He turns back around and Richie takes that as an invitation to sit down. The concrete is cold and hard and he's not wearing shoes, but when Bill offers him the cigarette, he takes it. "Why're you up?"

"Just getting some water." He takes a drag and coughs a little— it's been awhile since he's smoked a cigarette, and the burn is a little rougher than the one he gets from smoking weed. "Saw the light on and came out to see what was up. And the rest is history."

Bill chuckles, putting out the cigarette on the step below them when he's done with it and kicking away the ashes. Richie's mouth, as usual, starts moving on its own.

"You only smoke when you're stressed," he says, knocking his knee into Bill's. "What's going on, Big Bill?"

"I guess I was just th-th—" He swallows around the stutter and Richie sees his fingers curl into his palms as he tries to say the word correctly. "I was thinking about what you s-said earlier."

"I say a lot of shit, Billy." Richie says, throwing in the extra nickname

he usually keeps in his back pocket. He seldom whips it out; it's happened less and less as they've gotten older and Bill's stutter has faded. These days, he only uses it when he needs to make sure Bill doesn't think it's the only thing Richie hears. "You'll have to be more specific."

"About ending up alone." Bill worries his lip between his teeth for a second. "M-maybe I'm—"

"No." Richie cuts him off. He doesn't look over, but he can feel Bill's eyes on him. "There's no fucking way that you don't have a soulmate, Bill Denbrough."

When he finally does look at Bill, the other boy is looking down at his hands.

"You're the best person I've ever met." Richie says, half-mumbling as his face goes a little pink. Bill meets his eyes then. "The only way that you don't have a soulmate is... is if God finally realized that no one is good enough for you."

"I thought you didn't believe in God." Bill says. Richie fights against the urge to break eye contact in fear of embarrassing himself.

"I don't." He shrugs. "I believe in you."

Bill smiles then, and Richie finally has to look away.

"Anyway, it's really fucking late." Richie reaches out and shoves Bill's shoulder affectionately, if not a little too hard. "You should get some sleep." He stands and offers Bill a hand to help him up, but Bill shakes his head.

"I'll just be another m-minute." He explains, laying his arms on top of his knees.

"Try not to freeze to death." Richie responds, reaching for the door.

"Thanks, Richie." Bill's voice is quiet, thoughtful. Richie smiles to himself.

"Yeah, of course, Big Bill." He says. "Anytime."

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Mike is the first of them to actually hear his soulmate.

His grandfather takes him out of town for his birthday, to some theme park from his childhood, so they don't hear about it until he shows up at school with a mile-wide smile on his face.

She's not from Derry, he tells them. Her name is Amanda and she lives two towns over, but she makes deliveries to the farm every other week, and Mike has always had a thing for her. He tries to explain what it's like to them, how it doesn't feel like an intrusion, how it feels *right*.

"It's like she's always been there, but she was just on mute or something." He pauses like he's thinking, and then laughs a little. "Sorry she said— she said something funny."

Nobody says anything, but Richie assumes they're all thinking along the same lines.

Richie's happy for Mike, he *is*, but it's hard to ignore the pang of jealousy he feels every time Mike gets that look on his face— the one that tells them he's talking to her in his head.

They change the subject eventually, over to their collective plans for the weekend, but the heaviness of everyone's impatience is hanging in the air between them.

When they were younger, it was easy to ignore the whole soulmate thing. It was so far off for so long. They could date who they wanted, and things potentially going wrong was half the fun. But now. Now everyone is afraid of falling for someone they can't have.

Richie glances at Bill as the thought crosses his mind, like it's second nature to associate him with that sort of thing. At some level, it probably is.

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The first time they actually see it happen is on Ben's birthday.

His mom makes enough food to feed a small army, and the Losers devour it all. They eat so much they can't move, not even enough to glance at their phones. They don't even realize how late it is, until it hits midnight and Beverly and Ben shoot up at the same time.

"Bev?" Richie, who's been the equivalent of Beverly's pillow for the last hour, reaches out for her. She doesn't answer, instead making eye contact with Ben across the room. A heavy minute of absolute silence passes and, in those sixty seconds, everyone puts two and two together.

They don't make a sound for the next few minutes, except for the occasional little noise in the backs of their throats, like they're wrestling with trying to stay within their heads. Everybody else stays quiet, giving them some metaphorical space— it's hard to give them *actual* space when most of the Losers are piled together on the available surfaces. And still too stuffed to move, even if the burst of adrenaline they're all submerged in makes it seem almost feasible.

"Shit." Bev says softly after a little bit. She turns to look at Richie who raises his eyebrows expectantly. "It's— I'm not even sure how to describe it."

But she and Ben both try anyway, going back and forth and attempting to sum up whatever's happened into words that make sense. They finish each other's sentences already, and Richie thinks he might vomit.

"You know he's n-never going to let us forget this, right?" Bill leans over and mutters to Richie. Beverly has moved to sit next to Ben, so Richie and Bill are alone on the couch.

"Hmm?" Richie asks, lolling his head to the side so he can look at Bill without expending too much effort.

"That Bev is his soulmate." Bill clarifies. "It's gotta be p-pretty rare for your soulmate to be who you always w-w-wanted it to be." There's something in his words that hits a little too close to home; like Bill is hoping for someone in particular, like he doesn't think it'll happen.

Richie pointedly ignores the way his stomach drops.

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Eddie is definitely the most surprised.

His mom commandeers him for the night of his birthday, so nobody knows what happened until Eddie starts spamming their group chat.

Eddie Spaghetti: *Guys.*

Eddie Spaghetti: *Guys, holy shit.*

Eddie Spaghetti: *Jesus Christ, someone respond.*

Stan the Man: *Eddie, calm down.*

Eddie Spaghetti: *I am not going to calm down. This is insane.*

Stan the Man: *It is not insane.*

Billiard Ball: *Jesus guys, what's wrong?*

Stan the Man: *Nothing is wrong.*

Trashmouth: *Isn't it obvious?*

Eddie Spaghetti: *I never said anything was WRONG just that it's INSANE!*

Stan the Man: *Eddie. Come on.*

Micycle: *?????*

Marshall Law: *They're soulmates.*

Benny Boy: *Oh my god.*

It takes around two weeks for Eddie to stop losing his mind every

time he hears Stan's thoughts. Richie knows it's not that he's upset by the revelation— he hopes Stan knows it too— but Eddie is a total control freak, and he hadn't planned for this, hadn't planned on it being *Stan*. It's one thing to have a stranger in your head, it's another to have one of your best friends in there.

It starts to make sense to the other Losers eventually. Richie sees the way Eddie clings to Stan, the way he seems to break away at Stan's ramrod straight exterior. At one point, he catches Eddie mumbling to himself about how infuriatingly cute Stan is, and Richie knows there was no mistake.

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It's down to Bill and Richie now, and Richie is trying really hard not to get his hopes up as his birthday barrels closer and closer. He tries even harder not to think about the fact that, come March 7th, everything is going to change— no matter what the outcome.

If Bill is his soulmate, Richie thinks he might finally find the piece of him that's been missing for so long; he might finally feel whole. And if he's not... Richie doesn't even want to think about it.

He purposely throws his party the Saturday before his birthday. He knows he'll need to be alone when it happens. No one questions it, but he's sure they all understand. Beverly makes a point to hug him tight on the afternoon of the sixth, and he goes home with her voice ringing in his ears— *it's all going to work out, Rich*.

His phone goes off five minutes before midnight, and his heart leaps into his throat at the sound of Bill's ringtone.

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"I f-figured you wouldn't want to be alone." Bill's voice is quiet, nervous, and Richie feels a little bad for the way he answered. *"And you did the s-same for me, so."*

Richie doesn't respond, and they sit in silence, the only sound coming from the rain beating against their respective windows. It's eerily

similar to the night of Bill's birthday, including the way those four and a half minutes seem to take three hours to drag by.

Richie's eyes stay trained on the digital clock on his nightstand, watching 11:58 turn into 11:59. He actually considers *praying* for a moment.

12:00. Silence. And then—

Please, God. Let it be me.

Richie's eyes shoot open. It's Bill's voice, but it's not coming through the phone. It's in Richie's head, swimming circles around his own thoughts, settling into his brain like it was always meant to be there. He practically chokes on his own breath as he tries to speak.

"Bill," he manages.

"Shit, Rich." Bill replies and Richie imagines he's had a similar experience in his own mind. "I—"

"I'm on my way."

Throwing on some clothes, he sprints down the stairs and out the front door. He debates for a moment taking the car. But Bill's house is only a couple of streets over, and he shudders to think what his dad would do if he found out Richie took his truck in the middle of the night. He grabs his bike from the garage instead.

It's a little cold out, and rain whips him in the face, but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters but getting to Bill, who's gone suspiciously radio silent in Richie's head.

When he reaches the Denbrough house, he throws his bike down into the yard and jogs around to Bill's side of the house. Scaling the tree outside is almost as easy as when they were kids and, less than five minutes later, he's falling through Bill's window.

"R-Richie!" Bill stands up from where he'd been sitting on his bed with a book in his hand. "God, you're soaking wet."

Richie pushes down the instinct to make a dumb joke in favor of reaching for Bill's hands.

"Who cares?" He asks. "It's you, Bill— *it's us.*" Bill swallows hard in response as he nods.

"Yeah," he says, and Richie finds himself not breathing. Bill's tone is flat, empty— not shaking like Richie's. Nothing like Richie's. *Why is he acting like that?*

He's never really considered that maybe this isn't what Bill wanted.

"Don't sound so fucking excited." Richie grumbles, dropping Bill's hands and shoving his own into his pockets. Bill's eyebrows shoot up and he shakes his head.

"No, Richie. God, th-that's— I didn't mean—" Bill trails off, raking a hand through his hair as he tries to organize his thoughts. After a moment, he opens his mouth like he's going to say something, and Richie waits with his pulse going a mile a minute.

Fuck it.

The words are as clear in Richie's mind as they'd be if Richie thought them himself as Bill wraps a hand around the back of his neck and pulls him in.

Bill's lips are warm and soft against Richie's and he's pretty sure he's died and gone to Heaven. There's a string of expletives passing back and forth between them in their heads, and it's almost impossible to tell who's saying what. Their thoughts blend together so evenly, so perfectly, that Richie is astounded he ever managed to live without it before.

"I've wanted to do that for so fucking long." Bill says, pulling away and leaning his forehead down into Richie's.

"Well, why the fuck didn't you?" He asks. He's trying to keep his usual snark but really only succeeding in sounding desperate.

“Because, Richie.” Bill pulls back completely then, holding Richie’s face in his hands. “I didn’t want to know what it felt like to have you in my arms if I was just going to lose you to someone else.” He swallows hard before he continues. “I couldn’t have handled that.”

The lack of his stutter has Richie swallowing a gasp. He chokes on it a little, but he’s determined not to draw attention to Bill’s smooth and flowing tone. He’s determined not to let a single thing ruin this moment. Instead, he manages a hushed reply.

“You’re never going to lose me.” Richie whispers the words into Bill’s mouth as he kisses him again. Bill presses a hand into his back, bringing their bodies even closer together. His other hand works its way into Richie’s hair and Richie practically whines at the sensation.

He’s got a million things he wants to say, but he can’t figure out how to make any of them sound right. He hears Bill’s laugh in his mind and a warmth floods his body.

No need. I read you loud and clear.

Author's Note:

thank you for reading!

please drop a comment below letting me know what you think!